

Prescribed Fire Qualification System Developed

By Thomas M. Gavin

The Western Region Prescribed Fire Qualification System, which has attracted considerable interest recently both from other resource management agencies and from elsewhere within the NPS, was developed in FY 1983 and now has been fully implemented.

The system consists of three prescribed fire position levels: Prescribed Fire Manager, Prescribed Burn Boss, and Crew Member. The training course prerequisites for each position were defined in conjunction with the recommended skill/knowledge levels prepared by the Prescribed Fire and Fire Effects Working Team in 1979 (see *Prescribed Fire Job Qualification Guide*, National Wildfire Coordinating Group). Because of the wide diversity in vegetation types among the different parks in the Western Region, we elected to define a set of mandatory core courses which address the common training needs in all our parks.

Electives Requested

Each park involved in the use of prescribed fire was asked to submit an expanded set of electives that would supplement this core. Electives were to have been site-specific in nature. For example, Sequoia Kings Canyon NP requires S-212 (Power Saws) as a requirement for Prescribed Burn Boss, where Joshua Tree National Monument, for obvious reasons, does not.

The Western Region core, together with the expanded list of park-specific electives, was approved by Superintendents and is maintained on file in the Western Regional Office. This has been of tremendous value in defining overall Regional Training needs.

While developing the course curricula for each of the three positions, we attempted to shape each position to the organizational structure of most of our parks using prescribed fire. The Prescribed Fire Manager is typically the responsibility of the Natural Resource Management Specialist concerned with fire effects, post-burn monitoring, and overall program management. Ideally, this individual will generate burning prescriptions and plans. The Prescribed Burn Boss is more of a practitioner and ideally is responsible for fire suppression within the park. The thrust of this position is burn plan implementation. The Crew Member position usually is assumed by all others within the park who provide support to prescribed burning programs.

Briefly, the courses desired of a Prescribed Burn Boss emphasize concepts in Natural Resource Management and may not necessarily be fire-specific. The Burn Boss courses focus on skills, organization, safety and suppression capabilities. The Crew Member program is designed to provide a minimum level of knowledge in fire behavior. All three position requirements differ, both in Regional core requirements and park-specific electives. Likewise, physical fitness requirements are slightly different between

positions. In some areas, one individual may have to assume all three positions, depending upon the size of the park staff. However, our ultimate goal is to have an individual or individuals qualified as Prescribed Burn Boss and Prescribed Fire Manager in each park conducting a Prescribed Fire or Natural Prescribed Fire Program within the Region. The current Red Card System is being used to track an individual's skill level.

Key Requirement

The fundamental and key requirement within the qualification system is the Western Region Prescribed Fire Course. This is a two-week Park Service specific course designed to train people in the skillful application of prescribed fire. Emphasis is placed on classroom knowledge of fire behavior and field application of prescribed fire to meet a predetermined *NPS objective*. During the course, students are exposed to the Standardized Western Region Prescribed Burn Plan Format being used at all parks within the Region. Completion of the course requires that students successfully complete an actual burn during the training course. In turn, this is supplemented by a minimum of two burns by each student within his/her base park. This gives students exposure to a variety of burns within differing fuel models. Following the completion of the formal training course, a cadre of Regional course facilitators moves from park to park in order to grant final certification relating to the park specific burns. These hands-on actions have contributed to the accumulation of a Burn Plan Library, being maintained in the Regional Office. Ultimately, prescriptions in all fuel models within the Region will be represented and will be at the disposal of all field managers.

We in the Western Region believe that this certification system shows real promise. Individuals from many parks have completed certification burns and a major result has been a sense of sound communication and cooperation within the Region and with other agencies.

For those of you considering such a system, one last comment is warranted. Implementation is not easy. It may present hardships and may curtail, at least in part, burning programs that may have existed prior to implementation of the system. Furthermore, it is expensive and requires extreme dedication on the part of the Superintendents, park staff, and ultimately the Regional Director. However, any misuse of prescription fire by the National Park Service has the potential to claim human life, destroy personal property and unnaturally alter our ecosystems. With this in mind, we feel that a qualification system for the use of prescribed fire is no less important than the one we have established for fire suppression. This is especially significant when we consider that, unlike the case with wildfires, the Service is directly liable for all fires that are NPS-initiated.

Gavin is a Fire Ecologist for NPS in the Western Region.